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Carol Iannone

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Chapter from Political Passages: Journeys of Change through Two Decades, 1968-1988, edited by John Bunzel

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The Wide and Crooked Path

Carol Iannone

What the sixties were to become for me, although I did not recognize it at first, was an intense internal struggle to possess my own soul against the traps of pseudothought. Mine was more a contest of thoughts than of actions, an embattled sentimental education in which I discovered a crowded marketplace of cheap ideas to distract me from the task of facing myself, and in which I eventually had to pay the consequences of surrender to the rampant half-truths, self-deceptions, self-justifications, and outright lies that are certainly not peculiar to any age but to which some ages, like the sixties, offer less resistance.

The whole process did not begin in my experience with picketing, marching, sitting down, or demonstrating; in fact, it never included those things, although I was to buy most of the political package soon enough. No, the sixties—that chronologically misnamed era, as someone has observed—began for me sometime toward the end of the decade in a theology class at Jesuit Fordham University in which I learned that the God of my childhood was dead. I too had chuckled in the irreverent atmosphere of post-Vatican II at the downfall of the old bearded man in the sky and the collapse of the triangle with the eye in its center. I suddenly sensed in that class, however, some serious withdrawal of foundations. Naively, considering the adolescent cynicism of those around me, I asked the teacher if I could continue to pray for the grace to study. I don't know why my

query took that particular form; I was not a natural student and had little real personal discipline despite (or perhaps because) of years in Catholic schools. But I guess now that I was angling for something deeper than just a study aid.

Amid the smirks and chortles, the teacher told me briskly and with some condescension that such an idea was stupid; instead of praying to God to help me study, I should just sit down and study. (But that was the whole point of grace, I thought, a point that would seen recede from my grasp: "The good that I would, I do not"!) Suddenly, the ground gave way and the world opened up as a cold and hostile place. I stood squarely alone, devoid of the lightness of grace, relying on the chancy forces of willpower and the troubling inconsistencies of rationalism, with no way to transcend the gap between the me I was and the me I hoped to become.

That was it. I didn't realize it fully until much later, but at that moment, for all practical purposes, my faith was gone. I had lost any concept of a God at hand, a present help in trouble, and from then on I was on my own, open and vulnerable to the aggressive shifts and turns that were rapidly to follow.

The Church meantime had become a place of ecstasy. A lot of sublimated sexuality seemed to bubble to the surface and to prompt a good deal of the exuberance of those times, I came to see. Boys and girls began to write long letters to each other testifying to the fervor of their renewed religion. Nuns and priests defected to get married, often to each other. Masses were held in people's apartments, on lawns, in gardens, the officiating priests often clad in T-shirts and chinos. There was singing, dancing, music. Someone was always thrusting a cup of wine at you, offering you a piece of bread, clasping your hand or hovering near you for the kiss of peace. It seemed you could never be alone with God anymore. Everyone seemed more in love with each other than with Him—not surprising, since He had become something of a formality. Out of my experience went the darkened churches I could slip into on Saturday afternoons to unburden my heart.

What was there anymore to unburden? The concept of sin had shriveled; it was no longer important to follow the teachings of Christ so much as the "example of his life," i.e., "love." Love and do what you will, Paul was supposed to have said, although I've never been able to find the exact quote and, in any event, had he been able to see how his words would be used, he might well have unsaid them. The appalling trivialization of the meaning and essence of

love was one of the chief barbarisms of the sixties. (Its residue persists to this day in the poorly focused talk of compassion and brotherhood, but even more in the stunning superficiality of sexual relationships.) The new morality was guided not by an expanded sense of love, but by impulse—by what it felt right to do in the moment, with the frequently and sanctimoniously reiterated proviso that it not hurt anyone else (also only in the moment).

No one talked about the contexts, the consequences, the responsibilities, the limitations, the contradictions that can occur even between competing goods, let alone good and evil (a word that dropped out of the lexicon), and that far from inhibiting love, define it. No one talked about the disorganization of character that results from petty indulgence and how hard it is to establish internal order afterwards. These things you had to discover for yourself; with all the cultural cheerleading you heard going into the new "life-styles," you were entirely alone in finding your way back.

Nevertheless, it seems clear now that I cannot blame my loss of faith on the upheavals of the times. Despite years of catechism, masses, communions, confessions, benedictions, and so forth, my house had been built on sand and great was the fall of it. Then too, for a sensitive, scrupulous child, the pre-Vatican II Church was in many ways a house of horrors, as dark and cheerless as anything that Calvinism had devised. My moments of grace had often been achieved outside of the rituals and sacraments to which I was nevertheless bound by fear. (Missing the nine o'clock children's mass was one of my chief anxiety dreams well into adulthood.) Later in my life, I was able to discern how different the more Old World Catholicism of my mother was from mine. When she retreated with her novenas, rosaries, and candles, it was to enter a world of unconditional peace, solace, and comfort. But many of us who came up under the American Church had become acquainted with guilt, terror, self-condemnation, a false concept of self-sacrifice, and an abiding sense of our own worthlessness.

Those who tried to destroy the spurious conceptions of God that had produced this cruelty weren't wrong, but they had nothing substantial to put in their place. The superficial freedom they advanced was too much the reverse image of the bondage they thought they were escaping. And they underestimated how excruciatingly difficult it would be to find a genuine release from what enslaved us. (It seems logical now that this lack of understanding of true spiritual freedom, combined with the loss of real faith in God's power to aid

His creation, should have culminated in a political response—"liberation" theology—in which working out one's own salvation is replaced by material advocacy for the poor.)

A great flood of unhappiness and confusion was to issue from my collapse of faith when it finally caught up with me. But in the iconoclastic air of the sixties it was possible to avoid its implications and even make light of it. The problem went underground, so to speak, appearing as a general disaffection (possible to mistake in those days for a legitimate response to cultural ills) or in an intensification of my occasional bouts of melancholy. My first job out of college was as a substitute teacher in a Catholic grammar school. During the interview, the more traditional-minded sister-principal asked me if I believed in the Real Presence, i.e., that Christ is really present at the moment of consecration in the mass. I probably should have been ashamed to say it, but I told her yes, and at that point I saw no contradiction since I had not really troubled to think things through. He was really there, I thought, He just didn't matter to me. But I was never to know a solid moment of peace or joy until I had found my way back to Him, years later and in terrible pain.

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I grew up in an extended family that started out in the Italian section of East Harlem, and a large part of our identity was rooted in the idyll of the immigrant culture of those streets. For those of us too young to have experienced much of it firsthand it was almost as real as for those who did, because we never tired of hearing the stories of the older folks, who never tired of telling them. The community was tightly knit, consisting of many large and interlocking families and little enclaves of "paesani." There was always a hand for those in need, often extended surreptitiously for those too proud to admit their trouble. When a boy returned from the war or a bride descended from her home on her way to church, the entire block turned out to greet them. (A wonderful wide-angle photograph preserves this moment on my mother's wedding day.) On Saturday nights, people would visit each others' houses until four in the morning and then continue talking by the door until the arrival of the milkman. There were the feasts, the weddings (children always invited), the splendid, emotion-wracked funerals, the Italian theater, and concerts on summer nights in the park along the river. And, we were told, when the voice of Caruso was heard wafting across East Harlem some decades before, it was liable to be not just a recording, but Caruso himself, paying a visit to friends.

It was largely a working-class and small-business community, but there was considerable prosperity. There was a classy dress shop at 125th Street and Fifth Avenue, and dressmakers, milliners, and music teachers had plenty of employment. Between First and Third Avenues, 116th Street was lined with brownstones inhabited by the professionals—the judges, doctors, lawyers who seemed to feel no need to leave the old culture behind despite their upward mobility (something that would later perplex me), but who continued to enjoy the life of the neighborhood—the boccie games, the long Sunday dinners, and the frequent parties with mandolins and accordions.

But other stories troubled me, like that of the young doctor who had left Italy and journeyed to Harlem to seek his future. Even from across the Atlantic, his family managed to constrain him from marrying the woman with whom he fell in love because his mother didn't want him to remain in America. I came to conjecture when I started to feel the tension myself that his capitulation to his mother had derived from the confusion of identity that such an ultracohesive culture can produce: where was the boundary between oneself and others? Blessed were you if there was no conflict, but if there was, it was liable to be sore and sharp; and if you would come to feel at times that you couldn't live within the family, neither could you live without it. Thus the young doctor eventually left Harlem, as his mother had wanted, to return to his hometown in Italy. But by that time he *had* married, very inappropriately—"out of spite," it was said—and was to live out an unhappy, lonely life, according to reports. Refusing to go to his mother's deathbed many years later, he turned his face to the wall when his brothers came to implore him to come. The young woman he hadn't married, my great-aunt, refused all other suitors and never recovered from her early bitterness. Left to care for her parents, she remained deeply emotionally dependent on the family all her life, and often raged against its strictures.

I lived only a little scrap of my childhood in the neighborhood before the various families began their treks into the boroughs and suburbs. But the core of the culture went with us—above all, the absolute and peremptory centrality of the family life. This was bound to cause conflict as the American century progressed, probably even without the special pressures of the sixties, but my search for a separate identity was exacerbated by the extreme version of an unconditioned individuality beyond circumscription that was borne of the sixties. I felt an enormous strain between the gospel of feelings and impulses advanced by the changing times—the imperatives to find myself, to

live for now, to try it if it felt good, and so forth—and the sublime, self-abnegating images of the family myth, in which grown children cared for sick parents, went to work to help out their brothers and sisters, and came home on Friday nights with a treat for the family. At family gatherings, particularly in the presence of the men, I would long, for the moment, to be the woman they thought I was or thought I would become.

My faith in family solidarity did not erode as quickly as my faith in God. It gradually diminished, until at my grandmother's deathbed, some half dozen years after college, I realized that it had been something of a deception. The intensity of the extended family life can be wonderful, exhilarating, almost magical, but it can exact a great price of selfhood (something clearly not recognized by those who began recommending the extended family as an "alternative" to the restrictions of the insular nuclear American model).

It may seem odd that someone from a working-class Italian immigrant background would succumb to the upper-middle-class luxury of countercultural thinking (and, indeed, my one attempt to join an antiwar rally in Central Park was frustrated when my mother implored me not to go because the night before she'd dreamt of a bullet in the head), but there was an underlying continuity. Having grown up under two ideologies of self-denial, I was susceptible to an ideology of self-fulfillment, especially one advanced, like the former ones, for the greater good. Ironically, the philosophies of the new age turned out to be another form of perverse self-denial, as one surrendered the precious concreteness of one's own reality (however difficult) on the altar of ephemeral dreams and promises. But the notion that individual liberation was leading to a collective regeneration of society prevented me from seeing this clearly at the time.

For all my commonsense skepticism, I came to support and even admire the radicalism, or at least the ideas I took to be behind it. Up close it was possible to see that the activists were often spoiled, infantile, self-consumed, full of resentment and free-floating, generalized rage. (The anti-Americanism that could seem so righteous at the time now seems a transparency for hatred of authority, of country, of parents, and finally of self.) As for their heroism, if you've read the stories of a few martyrs, it's hard to be really impressed by a bus trip to Washington and an overnight arrest. And I had my doubts about the professor who encouraged the students to demonstrate against the false hierarchies of privilege but wouldn't risk sitting down himself because he was untenured.

I gradually came to hate the war, and I probably did believe that America was too materialistic (since I believe it now), but I doubt the political issues were really the bottom line. I think now that I was drawn to the messianic dimension of the radicalism, the (deceptive) promise of the grace that I had lost. I wanted it to be true that there were whole other and better ways to live, not just for me, but for everyone—that life could be freer, easier, purer if only one could throw off the artificial restraints. Echoes of these longings for a better world could surely be heard in the folk music we listened to at the time, music as emotionally unsettling as the rock music kids listen to today.

Many have attributed this kind of aspiration to a Howdy Doody, Lone Ranger generation brought up in peace and prosperity devoid of a tragic sense. It's possible. But at the same time, we were a generation that learned about torture, brainwashing, and concentration camps as children and practiced air raid drills in grammar school. When I was a young girl, a series ran in the *Post* in which concentration camp survivors told of various tortures they had undergone. One man, for example, had been suspended for days from his hands tied behind his back, the ground beneath him hollowed out just enough to be beyond the reach of his toes. In sixth grade we were told of an incident in which Chinese communist soldiers had invaded a school in the countryside, lashed the children's hands behind their backs, and hammered chopsticks into their ears. How many adolescent discussions sputtered out into " 'But what would you do if you were in a concentration camp? Would you be able to stick to the moral rules if your survival was at stake?" Or, "What would you do if the Communists tortured you? Would you be able to resist betraying your friends?" Perhaps the sense of suffering was too great to be properly absorbed.

Be that as it may, with the loss of my faith and the confusion about my family identity (both felt and never acknowledged), reality sometimes weighed very heavily on me, along with the ominously impending demands of adulthood; I wanted there to be a way in which I wouldn't have to face the difficult day-to-dayness and the "load of my own unhappiness" which, like St. Augustine, I had begun to drag around with me. And the thought that somehow a collective salvation could be achieved—that the social structure could change so radically that what I dreaded facing could be dissolved into some newer order of priorities, some purer hierarchy of values—was irresistible and compelling beyond words. I can almost remember

the morning, a good decade or so after it all began, that I woke up and realized that no such changes would occur—that I would have to face, alone, all that I had hoped to evade, now only the more difficult to deal with because so long postponed.

Of course I wouldn't have recognized such deep-seated evasions at that time if they had come up and hit me on the head, and if anyone had tried to make me see them, I would probably have laughed him to scorn. But then again, no one did try, at least not to my memory. Educated people among the older generations seemed simply unprepared for the sixties, and were probably in many cases themselves compromised by its false hopes and tinny promises of personal and sexual freedom. It was years before I met anyone who understood the new thought and could challenge it effectively. (Family resistance was pretty much dismissed, of course.) Rejoinders that almost seem obvious now were hard to come by at first. But truth to tell, I wonder if any reasonable rejoinders would have been effective at the time. The call of the counterculture was not an appeal to reason, to say the least, but a very aggressive defiance of it.

The counterculture was able to gain so much ground because it insisted that any resistance to its blandishments was attributable to "uptight," middle-class morality—for example, to the frantic effort to preserve privilege, to the fear of the hidden homosexual in all of us, or to some other remote, shifting, and poorly understood motivation. This way of discrediting counterarguments has dealt a great and lasting blow to reasoned discourse that allows for motivations without letting them destroy all opposition.

At one point when I was still resisting the new thought, I tried to get a more traditional professor to deplore the use of Hamlet's remark, "Nothing's either good or bad but thinking makes it so," in a popular song of the day. I was frightened enough of such relativism to want him to reject it outright. After all, that remark is uttered by the early Hamlet; the later Hamlet arrives at greater certainty (as another professor had noted in Shakespeare class—why didn't I ask *him* to repudiate the lyrics of the song?) The professor would not give me the straightforward reassurance I wanted, and in a way he was right not to, since there is truth in Hamlet's earlier remark. Therein lay another lesson that I can see now. It is very hard to counter the simpleminded assertions of the left (or in this case the simpleminded distorted way a truth was being used) if you don't want to fall into simpleminded assertions of your own. And simple new ideas can seem more compelling than complicated old ones.

Thus, even though I'd joined a Young Conservative Club in high school, I eventually found that the conservative movement of that time, the esteemed William Buckley notwithstanding, couldn't compete with the instant excitement generated by the New Left.

The understanding of poverty furnishes an example. Anyone who made even the most modest effort to perform some kind of social service in those days, in my case in a day camp and foster home, could see how complex a picture poverty presented up close: how some poor people have a surprisingly buoyant sense of life; how some contribute miserably to their own difficulties; how frequent were the failures of even one's best efforts in working with them; how unglamorous and small were one's successes, at least when considered against the vaunting idealism of the age. How much easier it became to blame the system entirely and to demand large-scale solutions to eradicate the problem together with its troubling reminder of the tragic dimension of human life. ("The poor ye have always with ye," said Jesus in a statement seldom quoted by Christians today.) It became necessary to judge severely anyone who didn't agree with such solutions, because to acknowledge the possibility of disagreement, I see now, meant to acknowledge the possibility of mortal life as inherently imperfect, to lose the sense of burning righteousness, and to be returned to the dry quotidian with a crash.

This kind of doublethink applied to a lot of things at the time. I guess we believed the publicity about being idealistic, and we were perhaps also flattered by certain older people with their own agendas into believing it about ourselves. Hadn't Robert Kennedy told my older brother's class at commencement that they were the best-fed, the best-educated, the best this, the best that generation in American history and that they were to go out and do great things? So we obliged by denying the implications of what in our experience contradicted the golden view.

But once in a while something would happen to pierce the glow of beatitude. I was at a party one night when the wife of one of the young men announced that he'd just been rejected for the service because of overweight. One of the other women phoned the news to her boyfriend and conveyed his comment to us all: "Congratulations on being a fat unpatriotic slob." The boyfriend had intended the remark to be entirely ironic, we knew, a mocking send-up of the hawkish crew-cut mentality, but perhaps because of being relayed secondhand, the remark fell flat. A moment of embarrassment ensued, and for that moment at any rate a lot of the pretense was suddenly stripped away.

The draft provided many opportunities for phony idealism and self-deception. There was some genuinely principled draft resistance, but the term was a misnomer in many cases. It is certainly a human enough impulse to want to avoid combat, and if the country allows it through various deferments, I suppose you can expect young men to take advantage of them. But this could hardly be construed as idealism, and yet we often did so construe it, remembering to rehearse the injustices and atrocities of the war every time someone reported on his various maneuvers to obtain a deferment. I sometimes wondered secretly if it was true that these men would gladly fight in a just cause, as they often said. Many young men were genuinely opposed to the war, but it was never easy to know how much of their behavior was based on principle and how much on simple self-preservation. Not having to make the distinction with any care was one of the cheap "luxuries" available in the thought of the time; and being female made you equally anxious not to do so, since you felt a little guilty about not being directly on the line.

This kind of thinking made it possible to become a modern liberal without much effort, without real examination of the issues, and without knowing anything about the history of radical politics. (For a long time I didn't even know why it was called the *New* Left.) With an extra access of doublethink it was even possible to become a proponent of the new ideas and yet still fancy that you were above their worst excesses. Then too, as an immigrant's daughter who had paid many bright-eyed visits to the Statue of Liberty with her father, I kind of knew somewhere that I didn't really believe all the Amerika rhetoric. Yet, with existential inexorability the ideas to which I was giving lip service were affecting me more deeply than I realized.

If I seemed to become a liberal within weeks, my best friend managed to become a radical overnight, more proof, I see now, that the countercultural appeal was not to reason—hers was a really startling transformation that eventually tore us apart. She was beautiful, bright, creative, athletic, funny, a wonderful friend, and full of promise which had begun to blossom in college. We had been close from freshman year in high school, and it was she in fact who had introduced me to the *National Review* and influenced me to join a Young Conservative Club. Then suddenly she was into everything—drugs, sex (with an attendant bout of gonorrhea), a sort of communal living arrangement, demonstrations, open hostility to her parents, nude parties, minor skirmishes with the law, and so forth. Her transformation was so dramatic and was so obviously built at least in good measure on the eruption of unsavory traits of temperament that I had [illegible]

been tipped off. Up close I could see that her new life was disheveled and even sordid; but in theory I somehow found it enviable, even romantic. She was breaking all the shackles, she was finding herself, she was free.

Her boyfriend treated her with a jealous, domineering, sexual possessiveness that sometimes tipped over into sadism—another contradiction that I could not quite fathom at the time. None of the nonradical men I knew would have dared to treat a woman that way—putting his hand down her blouse in public to show proof of ownership. We are accustomed to hearing that modern feminism was born when women in the movement woke up to the shock of how conventionally the radical men behaved toward them. But I wonder how much of the impulse toward feminism arose in opposition to the masculine brutality specifically unleashed by countercultural dictates to overthrow the norms, including some types of deference to women.

I tried at one late point, I thought for her own good, to confront her with the deterioration of her life. She countered cuttingly, and correctly, with the dry misery of my own and brought me to tears. Not knowing enough about the sources of your own unhappiness makes you very vulnerable to radical assaults.

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The considerable confusion I was experiencing in all areas of life might actually have led to some sort of self-confrontation had not the atmosphere been so full of the "hot winds of change," as playwright August Wilson appreciatively calls them. There were so many means of evasion one could explore in the name of finding oneself—taking a trip, changing jobs, starting a romance, or living with someone instead of marrying him, so you wouldn't have to make up your mind whether you loved him enough to commit your life to him. Kicking and screaming we are dragged into adulthood, I heard someone say years after these events, but my time was not yet.

I wandered into publishing, where I was positioned as an editorial assistant, one of those low-level "glamour" jobs that were perfect breeding grounds for the female discontent that we were then hearing so much about (and have been hearing ever since). I felt encouraged to view my dissatisfaction as not peculiar to me, but typical of women's lot in patriarchy, and I jumped at the chance. I announced that I was quitting my job and shaded my decision with political dimensions—could females only type and fetch coffee? I asked by implication in my resignation notice. Actually, I didn't only type and fetch coffee, and, moreover, several of the editors, including my own, were women. I was really announcing my failure to stick to something until I had gained the knowledge, ability, and temperamental capacity to advance. Some years later, forced to do temporary secretarial work to help support myself, I realized I was being made to learn the lessons I had refused the first time around.

Not surprisingly, my next "decision" was to go to graduate school, where I suppose I hoped to escape from the real world a bit longer (but where it finally caught up with me). Truth to tell, however, in returning to school to study literature I was returning to something I really loved. I had felt a genuine excitement in learning at college, and literature had opened up to me the fierce and subtle world of ideas and feelings the way Chapman's Homer had opened up the ancient world to Keats. Thankfully, Fordham had by no means been in the vanguard of the various reforms of the day, and my education had been basically in the classical style, not least in its overall structure, give or take a few radical-minded younger professors. My teachers, perhaps because they hadn't as yet succumbed to the insistence to think otherwise, saw me, as far as I could tell, as an individual with potential, not as a member of some marginal group needing special treatment.

Still, without knowing it, I had already begun to experience in college, to some degree, the enlistment of literature in the radical cause, something that I was to see much more of in graduate school at Stony Brook (where I was attracted by the unstructured, innovative curriculum and implicit promise of revelation). It wasn't until I started teaching and hearing myself talk about the corruption of civilization, the superiority of outsidedness, the inevitable alienation of the sensitive soul, and so forth—long after I had stopped believing in these things, at least in their simpler versions—that I realized how deeply such ideas had taken root in me. It took a long time for me to see that if Conrad is exposing the hypocrisy of civilization in *Heart of Darkness*, for example, he is not also implying that primitivism is better, or that civilization is dispensable, disposable, or even readily alterable. And if *Huckleberry Finn* is about rebellion against civilized restraints, it does not follow that civilized restraints should be discarded.

One professor had used literature to illustrate how the person of superior insight must sometimes lie to protect the harsh truths of life from corruption and distortion by society. This kind of lying

occurs in both of the works just mentioned, in fact. There is a shred of veracity in this idea—Jesus spoke in parables, for example, and told his disciples not to cast their pearls before swine, although he never licensed actual lying. But it is also the kind of idea that, without a proper disciplining context (such as Jesus supplied), easily lends itself to misapplication—to gain a false sense of superiority over the ordinary run of humanity, or to justify lying or withholding the truth when revealing it might simply be unpleasant (something I frequently did to protect the "truth" of my new "life-style" experiences from my family).

But I was eventually to see as well that there had been a certain unsustainable idolatry implicit in the way literature had been treated in the classical humanist tradition of the literary generations before the sixties. This may well have accounted for the weariness I began to sense in some professors in graduate school who were defecting from a worn-out faith. Indeed, one eminent literary critic announced that the study of literature had become "moribund." But, more important, the idolatry may also have had the result, I see now, of preparing the way for the incorporation of modern literature into the service of the counterculture. To question the truths of the texts, to counter the alienation, outsidedness, disaffection, and rebellion one often found in post-Enlightenment literature, would have been considered almost sacrilegious. Norman Mailer's frenzied orgiastic ideas received the enthusiastic support of the literary establishment of the fifties because they were seen as part of the sacrosanct process of artistic exploration. There was a time, and some people imagine we are still in it, when the educated liberal felt he could welcome the literary assault against ordinary decencies, fully confident that the center would always hold.

At any rate, probably due to a combination of two factors, disaffection from the previous sacred trust, and the growing urgency to radicalize literature, all sorts of foreign elements were introduced into the curriculum during the seventies—structuralism, deconstruction, Marxism, and, the one most important for me, feminism. A couple of years into my studies, I was invited to team-teach a course in women and literature.

At first I experienced some discomfort over the content of the course, which seemed to be more about the women in the class than about the literature. But I soon came around. The female voice had been silenced throughout history (!), and consciousness raising was necessary in order to bring to the surface the long-suppressed

truths. Instead of literature being dead on the page (but literature had always been alive for me!), we were making it kindle in our experience.

I began to enjoy and even revel in the utterly systematic although utterly spurious property feminism takes on when it is used as a tool of analysis, especially to the exclusion of all others. Like Marxism, feminism follows a single thread, the exploitation of women, to explain everything from advertising to religion. How comprehensible everything became. All injustice and evil were caused by patriarchy; dismantle patriarchy and we would have the brave new world of feminism, humane, generous, peaceful, good. Women had been defined by men; let women define themselves and thereby change the world.

Until I perceived this messianic dimension fully, my interest in feminism had been spasmodic. Even though I'd had access to it in quitting my job in publishing, for example, I had always been a little sceptical. The women in my family wielded enormous domestic power (too much as far as I was concerned), and even in later moments of utmost ideological fatuity I could not pretend that they wielded this power out of frustration in not having careers. And in the family of a factory worker who labored long and hard to keep his wife at home with the children, it was difficult to make a case for the exploitation of women. Then too, if I often professed to be disappointed when men resisted feminism, I secretly found it even more disappointing when they succumbed to it. But what were reservations like these in the face of the "dream of a world in which things would be different," to quote Theodor Adorno? I remember earnestly insisting to one sympathetic young man that all of civilization had been distorted due to the exclusion of the feminine principle and that once this was restored, we would think and feel and act in totally and unimaginably different ways. The female perspective was to be the means of perfecting all things, bringing the hope of salvation and yes, dear reader, the promise of grace.

I insisted to one doubtful professor that the women and literature class was not reductive, as he suspected, but expansive. We were gentle and subtle, I explained, not aggressive or strident. We were simply examining how the literature dealt with women, how we all responded to that, and how it illuminated our own lives. What could be wrong with that? Of course, there were ideologues who would reduce it all to propaganda, but we were above that; there were vulgar feminists as there were vulgar Marxists, but not us. We were being sophisticated, detached, disinterested.

I realize this may sound somewhat disingenuous now, since I was also utterly convinced of the rightness of the cause, but I was basically sincere (if a little cunning in not always revealing the extent to which the course had become consciousness raising). I could not be accused of bias, as I saw it, because what others were calling bias I saw as the truth.

But another openly critical professor gradually managed to unsettle me enough to make me uneasy teaching the course a second time. I've been unable to remember what sorts of things he used to say to me, except that I was constantly exclaiming "What a terrible thing to say!" This was a typical female reaction to resisted truths, he answered. I was even further shocked by this assertion, since no one was permitted at that time to characterize female behavior for good or ill, except of course the feminists. Nevertheless, I listened distractedly. I also sketched out an idea for a dissertation—a feminist analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, and Virginia Woolf—that I somehow knew I would never really write, because I was suffering a writer's block and moreover had no real ideas, not necessarily in that order. At about this time too, I had a dream that I would one day write for *Commentary*. I continued along in this confused fashion until at last life intervened to bring me to my Kronstadt experience.

My chairman arranged for me to have a job interview at one of the upstate state colleges. The position entailed teaching three courses in the English department. On the ride up, the train stalled several times, and I kept popping the tranquilizers that I had come to rely on in stressful situations. They made me appear subdued during the interview, but that still can't explain everything that ensued.

Although only one of the three courses I would teach was in women's studies, I was met at the railroad station by the department's two feminists, who were allowed to question me alone at a nearby Howard Johnson's while consuming huge quantities of ice cream. (My own chairman later expressed surprise at this—at my being questioned alone, not at the ice cream. At Stony Brook, he said, a "control" person was always present for interviews of this kind, to prevent politics from overtaking other considerations.) These two laid the ax to my ideal of a subtle, intellectually disinterested feminism. They had no patience with any ambiguity or hesitation of any kind, and when I told them I was a feminist "in a state of evolving definitions" there was a conflagration.

They were radical lesbian man-hating feminists, and they raked my fastidious liberalism over the coals (their lesbianism could be readily established from their published writings, I learned later, not that I needed any additional proof). Literature was to be taught for its negative female stereotypes, to show women students "what the culture thinks of them." Male writers like Hawthorne and James were sexists and chauvinists whose main object in creating women characters was to detail their punishment for transgressing the limits of the female role. These two feminists practiced a very one-dimensional literary criticism that seemed to allow nothing for irony, ambiguity, tone, layers of characterization, narrative complexity, and so forth. One of them displayed direct, personal hostility. The milder one admitted to me in the ladies' room after it was over that it was unusual to be anything less than polite to a candidate. That was as much of an apology as I would get.

The inquisition over, they deposited me at the English department, signaling to their chairman that I was unacceptable. I underwent the formality of an interview with the chairman, who was clearly just a rubber stamp. Later he wrote my chairman that the two had sent him a letter characterizing me as "incompetent in women's studies" and "hostile" and "dull" besides. (Dull maybe, due to the tranquilizers, but hostile impossible, at least partly for the same reason.)

I was stunned. It was bad enough to have been treated so poorly, and to have found such simpleminded vulgar hate-filled ideologues pushing their wares in college classrooms, apparently with the blessing of their wimpy chairman, but even worse, the nature of this kind of assault was entirely new and utterly appalling to me. I naively persisted in believing that we'd had, basically, an intellectual disagreement. I had foolishly sent them a letter, right after the interview and before hearing from my chairman, to explain my position better. But they had attacked my professional competence and even, in a way, my character, and they had done so behind my back and with intent to harm.

I may have wished that my conversion experience had involved something more noble and expansive than just getting kicked in the rear end, but be that as it may, I could no longer evade the implications of the way I'd been traveling. It was some time before I took my official leave of feminism and the left (in fact, I had another broadly similar if less important run-in with two other lesbians in a women's studies class I taught at another college). But the heart and soul were out of it for me after that humiliation.

Everywhere I looked I began to see the cracks in the theory and the gaps between theory and practice. Feminism was a legitimate academic and literary approach, but could not be judged by ordinary academic and literary standards. Wrongfully excluded from the mainstream tradition, women writers had also been wrongfully seen outside of their separate "female tradition." Women were the same as men, women were different from men, according to ideological need. Women were angry and rebellious but also loving and tender. Women were the humane and nurturant sex, but they could leave their children in day care centers ten hours a day. Feminism sponsored choice for women, but not the choice of the domestic role. Feminism would better all of society, even though so much of its advocacy was, like affirmative action, obviously narrow and self-interested. Feminism was for the social good even though it openly advocated dismantling the entire social order. (Suppose some people liked things as they were?) I began to wonder, feminism might indeed change the world, or at least our part of it, but into what would it change it?

It didn't matter that I was reassured repeatedly that my interviewers were the extremes, the exceptions; I had glimpsed something of the ruthlessness of ideological commitment, at odds with its purportedly humane objectives. What good did it do to insist that they were only the exceptions when "exceptions" like that had muscled their way into power? Liberal feminism of my type and the genteel liberalism of the chairman, for that matter, had no defense against aggression like that, much in the way the milder forms of socialism had no protection against the more ruthless. In fact, I was beginning to see that liberal feminism had helped call this kind of thing into being. A typical academic feminist, I had observed the customary separation between my ideas and the extremes they permitted and even encouraged. But now I would be forced to see the continuum.

My way of approaching literature had been to see Hawthorne and James, for example, not as simple purveyors of oppressive patriarchal values, but as implicit critics of such values, sometimes even when they might seem to be explicitly upholding them. But although this represented a slightly more generous attitude toward the writer and made better use, I thought, of literary subtleties like irony, ambiguity, and tone, it still imposed a scheme upon the literature that was not legitimate. A writer has the right to criticize society or not, without various partisans rushing forward to claim his or her effort for some ideological framework. Whether imposed from within or without, ideology destroys literature and its life-generating possibilities, which sometimes conflict with preconceived ideas, as life-generating possibilities have a way of doing.

I could see too that although I'd been gentler about it than some teachers probably were, I had also encouraged women to look at their experience only within feminist terms. Consciousness raising inflames the discontent that is bound to be present in every woman's life and then in the ensuing disarray invites her to see it as the result of oppression, and to look to alleviate it in political terms.

To the extent that the personal becomes political, the woman loses contact with herself. She is constrained from seeing how many "feminine" problems are moral and characterological more than social or political, and are problems that, regardless of origin, only the individual can overcome—the inclination to vanity, self-centeredness, and sensuality; the longing to idolize men; even the tendency to surrender to emotional weakness. Then there is the hidden destructiveness in the various female poses and postures of helplessness and dependency women have always been loath to acknowledge, and which feminism has helped them avoid acknowledging too. When Susan Brownmiller argues that "while the extremes of masculinity can harm others (rape, wife beating, street crime, warfare . . .), the extremes of femininity are harmful only . . . to women themselves in the form of self-imposed masochism," she is revealing a terrible ignorance of human nature. "Self-imposed masochism" is selfish and hurtful to others as well as self.

The preliminary result of the politicization of the internal life may seem liberating, but the end result is enslavement, since politicization diminishes the individual's sense of control over her own destiny and weakens her self-discipline by encouraging her to blame others. (How much manipulation of men became possible through excuses supplied by feminism?) Much New Left thought began with the demand for greater individual freedom, but the real demands of freedom then led to a rush into collective, prefabricated identities, with feelings, thoughts, and ideas dictated by ideology. Feminism has enabled women to behave childishly—to demand equality and independence, but also preferential treatment and special protection as a group.

Feminism has also made many things worse by preventing women from seeing their experience clearly, as in the unspeakably dishonest comparison of women with blacks, or in the pretense, upheld by almost everyone, it seems, that women have never really wanted to stay home with children, but have always wanted the careers denied

them by society which must now pay compensation. Feminism refuses to see how much of a hand women have had in creating the system as it now stands, and how much it has served women's needs as well as men's. Feminism also joins the rest of the New Left in disdain for the Western tradition, although it is only on the basis of this tradition that a campaign for greater freedom for women could even have been mounted. On the other hand, with all its faulty but rigidly held convictions about certain matters, feminism is utterly and foolishly amoral about a whole host of issues—unable, for example, to decide if prostitution is exploitation of women or a praiseworthy example of women controlling their own sexuality in patriarchy. Similar debates go on over pornography, surrogate motherhood, and so on.

I was ready to listen more carefully to the skeptical professor. He became a generous and superlatively insightful mentor, and he supplied the historical context of what had been happening to me. I finally learned something about the Old Left and the disillusionment it had produced. Somewhere into this time I tucked a breathless, riveting, eye-popping few weeks of reading Alexander Solzhenitsyn for the first time. I was staggered. We began to hear, also at about this time, of the aftermath of the war in Vietnam—the boat people, the Vietnamese gulags, the Cambodian genocide, the fall of Laos. I could hardly believe that the ideas I had so "innocently," in some cases almost absentmindedly held were complicit in all that, but it was so. Nothing could be worse for the people of Southeast Asia, I had avowed in my ignorance of communism (forgetting what lessons the Church had tried to teach us) than our lethal presence there. But there was something worse, much worse.

I began to see the devastating effects of the counterculture in all areas of our lives. I have already implied some of these in passing—the deterioration of the relationship between the sexes, due to feminism and the sexual revolution; the appalling diminishment of the moral life (for the left morality is reduced to having the correct view on its roster of issues—nuclear war, the poor, the homeless, race, and so forth); the cynical disparagement of our country and its institutions and history; the decline and fragmentation of the educational experience; the dissolution of the structures of reasoned discourse; and the loss of the sense of individual responsibility in favor of blaming society.

I decided that I for one couldn't afford the luxury of the left. Many promoters of its unworkable ideals seemed to fare well enough,

denouncing the rampant injustice and corruption of our society at every turn while advancing their careers and pursuing lives of comfort, complete with dinner parties and summers in the country. If so many were suffering so unjustly, what right had I to a good life? Looking for something to live by, I thus found myself truly disorganized by the contradictions and inadequacies of New Left thought. Soon after these events, I met a young man, also a graduate student, in a sunny-side-up self-help program that the two of us would have been ashamed to join previously. We realized that because we both had consciously or unconsciously agreed that "gloom and doom" were the only proper response to the world's inequities, we had added two more people to the load of the world's problems. Change was possible without destroying the whole system. I dreamt of a better world, but the present one was savaged in the name of principles I endorsed.

I'd love to be able to say that this was the end of the follies, but there was still one more necessary, painful detour I took. Some time before, the increasing chaos of my personal life had landed me in a therapist's office during a seizure of desperation. (Far from realizing my internal disarray, I had first thought I was physically ill, and it took several doctors to convince me otherwise.) I became very involved through this therapist with the work of Wilhelm Reich. Eventually I underwent orgone therapy and took courses and seminars on Reich's work.

Despite the fact that Reich is usually associated with the radical/liberal left, the group that I joined was politically conservative, and the members maintained, with considerable proof, that Reich had become conservative later in his life. They were strongly anticommunist and professed a brilliant critique of the modern liberal character that in my disaffection I rejoiced to read. They insisted that Reich's orgasm theories had been distorted and misunderstood. These theories did not imply or endorse license, or four-lettering, as Reich scornfully called it, and there was nothing in them that was incompatible with a humane, loving, rational way of life. Achieving "orgastic potency"—not to be reduced to having simple ordinary orgasms—was the path to joyful, neurosis-free fulfillment for the individual and to a just, well-functioning order for society.

There is much in Reich's work that is valid and important, but overall it is another failed utopianism, wielding the usual argument of failed utopian ideologies—they do not fail, their application has been incorrect or insufficient, their theory remains pristinely valid. I see now that I was looking in Reich's work for things to be both

ways—a more conservative, cautious approach to social change combined with the salvific dimension, both individual and collective, that I had always sought.

I had to learn after my disgust with the left that conservative politics are not ipso facto a sign of inner light. And I had to discover the pervasive influence of Marx on so much contemporary thought. Since Reich had renounced communism as "red fascism," I thought I was safe, and I was utterly shocked to be brought to see how close Reich's ideas were to those of Marx—the claim to science, the absolute materialism, the insistence on explaining all phenomena by a single factor, the hope, however remote, not just for amelioration but for a complete transformation of society. I'd been led and misled by ideas whose origins I knew little about. Again, I was amazed. Then too, if Reich did renounce the Soviet state, he was mainly an anti-Stalinist, holding on to his faith in Lenin until the end—a distinction I learned from Solzhenitsyn.

My own therapy, which involved screaming, kicking, biting, and so forth, was causing enormous upheaval, but to little effect that I could discern. Many people also in orgone therapy were trying Actualizations, a spin-off of EST, on the recommendation of their therapists. I tried it too and soon decided that the therapists' recommendation of this crude mass behavioral modification program that should have been anathema to anyone seriously committed to Reich's work was a tacit, inadvertent admission that the therapy was not working to effect personal change, or not working in the way Reich had described. I tried to participate as best I could, but credulity was wearing thin. I sat there one day in the workshop watching a young woman practically go into a primal in order to satisfy the conductor's demand that she feel her feelings and I pondered. It was the beginning of the eighties and I wondered if I was ever again to inhabit a world of sanity.

All occasions began to conspire against me, or perhaps for me. I chanced to come upon a celebrity who had undergone orgone therapy some years before and had written a book about its marvelous results in his life and the splendid marriage it had led him to. I had heard that he was now separated from his wife, and in the glimpse I caught of him, walking about the streets of New York, he seemed older and less exuberant than the person who'd written the book, an ordinary mortal, not the "new man" I foolishly expected. The sight of him made me come face-to-face with the fatuity of my own expectations.

Then facts, public facts, took a hand. It suddenly came to light that the doctor-therapist chiefly responsible for carrying on Reich's

work after his death had had a second "wife" for seventeen years that he had never told anyone about, even (or I suppose especially) his real wife. He lived with the second "wife" every weekend when he was supposed to be at his laboratory. He had even had a child by her, who was about ten years old at the time of the discovery, while the doctor was nearly eighty. Many defended his behavior, some declaring, in effect, that sometimes a lie is necessary to protect the truth. (Where had I heard that before?) In addition, a biography of Reich himself published about that time revealed that Reich had forced two of his wives to have abortions, and had had an affair while one wife was in the hospital for treatment of cancer.[1]

It was hard to avoid the conclusion that the kind of personal sexual fulfillment Reich preached might indeed conflict with basic decencies and higher values, as is always the case with utopian theories. While sexual weakness could scarcely be unknown to someone who had matured in the counterculture, this was the first time it really sank in that an *ideology* of sexual freedom could prompt ruthless behavior and *justify* it. In the face of the revelations about Reich and the doctor, I heard people say, more than once, that the healthy, orgastically potent man cannot submit to social restraints. It also occurred to me for the first time that sexual liberation had been especially hard on women. I decided that I didn't need to analyze anything any further. I could take Jesus's advice and know them by their fruits. Then, after a few more shifts and lurches in my own therapy and a brief switch to another doctor, I could see quite clearly that apart from outside events, orgone therapy could never solve my problems.

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The illusions were gone at last. I was forced to face myself. I had been a coward—in running panic-stricken both from the challenges of life and from the spiritual demands of my own nature. I had allowed myself to be unfortunately and needlessly affected by the general antipathy to God and religion in our intellectual life. All the professors with whom I had studied T. S. Eliot, for example, had always prefaced explication of his later work with the insistence that we would examine it as poetry and not take seriously its content. (And this was the figure who had ruled our culture for decades.) I had decided that I too would repudiate the foolishness of religion, the refuge of losers and rejects who could not take life as it is. But then of course I exhausted myself chasing after nearly every false god the sixties could devise. I saw that I had to have the courage

of my own experience, and the salvation I couldn't live without could be found nowhere but in Him. (For that matter too, it has gradually become clear to me that it is no accident that our secularized, classical-humanist-rationalist-positivist tradition was unable to defend itself against the countercultural assault.)

The understanding that I couldn't live without God flashed over me while I was reading *The Courage to Be*, in which Paul Tillich makes a crucial distinction between fear and anxiety. He argues that while normal fear is fear of some specific evil, anxiety is fear at the vulnerability of the human condition itself. Such fear can obviously find no remedy within human experience, and to live—as opposed to merely exist—with such fear is utterly impossible. Escapes can be had of course, in drugs, alcohol, sex, money; and even more sophisticated escapes are available in work, art, intellection, or ideology; but there is no final remedy within mortal existence to the problem of being implicit in this anxiety.

It was really quite simple, but not painless, after that. Once the resistance was gone and I was forced to open up my heart, I found Him, or He found me. He had been right there all the time, in fact. In a way, the wide and crooked path had been straight and narrow all along, leading to Him, the God of love and principle, giver of all the grace that I could possibly want.

What does salvation mean to me, some might ask. Not something in far-off eternity, any more than it was that day in theology class when I struggled to hold on to a sense of the nearness of God. It means to be conscious here and now of having a place, being connected, feeling at peace, regardless of circumstances. It means not having to believe in the power or reality of fear or envy or any other sin, or of sickness or death or accident or error, for myself or anyone else. It means not having to accept as a finality this vast chaotic farce of material existence and then, paradoxically, being able to see it illumined and transformed beyond any expectation. It means not being destroyed by its pain or deceived by its ephemeral pleasures, but abiding serenely, knowing that no situation, no matter how severe, is beyond His healing love. It means not having to define oneself and one's prospects by the thousand worthless gauges of mortal existence and not having to be led about by the fads, clichés, and self-deceptions that can substitute for thought in our time. It means knowing that God's plan is unfolding for man even here and now and despite the material picture. It means to be able to experience a love that transcends contingencies and to see one's besetting demons dissolve again and again before a courageous heart.

I am supremely grateful that I was forced to take this journey, because what I have found is greater than anything I could even have dreamed of before.

Note

[1] Myron Sharaf, *Fury on Earth* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983).